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Soviet Ploy on 'Star Wars'?

Moscow May Be Trying to Put Reagan in a No-Win Position

By ERNEST CONINE

Hardly a day goes by without Moscow firing another thunderbolt to the effect that unless President Reagan is willing to halt his Strategic Defense Initiative the new arms-control talks that begin next month are doomed to failure.

The propaganda stage is being skillfully set for the Reagan Administration to be pilloried by domestic critics and worried allies for ruining the prospects for arms control by refusing to bargain away the "Star Wars" program.

Yet at present, and for several years to come, the initiative will be only a research program, even if Congress gives Reagan all the money that he wants. And if anything on this Earth is certain, it is that the Soviets have no intention of abandoning their own large "Star Wars" research efforts.

What is the Soviet game?

With the U.S.-Soviet negotiations in Geneva less than a month away, it is helpful to review the history of anti-missile defense programs in both countries. That record is sharply at odds with any notion that the Soviets have a built-in aversion to strategic defensive systems.

Whereas the United States sharply curtailed its defenses against bombers when unstoppable ballistic missiles became the major threat, the Soviets didn't. Soviet air defenses include 2,500 interceptor aircraft and 10,000 surface-to-air missiles. Sensibly or not, the Soviet Union also spends $3 billion a year on civil-defense programs; the Reagan Administration is asking for $119 million in the current budget.

Both countries worked on defensive systems against missiles in the 1960s, but the Soviets were the first to get serious. To quote John Pike of the anti-"Star Wars" American Federation of Scientists: "The first Soviet anti-ballistic missile was the Griffon, which was paraded in Red Square in 1963 . . . . In the late 1960s construction started on eight launch sites for the (Galosh) ABM in the vicinity of Moscow." More sites seemed in prospect.

The Johnson Administration sought negotiations with Moscow to limit ABM deployment, but the Soviets professed to be mystified over why anybody should feel threatened by a defensive system. Actually, the Soviet system would not have been effective against a determined U.S. missile attack, but the obvious Soviet emphasis on missile defense breathed new life into American ABM efforts.

After great controversy, a limited ABM deployment program proposed by President Richard M. Nixon was narrowly approved by Congress in 1969, whereupon the Soviets decided that they were interested in negotiations after all. The ensuing talks resulted in the ABM treaty of 1972, which as subsequently amended allowed each side only one ABM site. The agreement, however, did not attempt to curtail ABM research.

The United States dismantled its one ABM site in 1976, but the Soviet Union has kept its ABM system surrounding Moscow, and is in the process of upgrading it. To quote Pike's article in the bulletin of the Arms Control Assn., the Soviets "have been developing a more advanced follow-on to the Galosh system . . . . Five new launcher sites are under construction."

U.S. intelligence sources are convinced that, in addition, the Soviets are converting some of their anti-aircraft missiles to ABMs in violation of the 1972 treaty. Meanwhile, both sides have continued research into more exotic ballistic missile defense technologies utilizing lasers, directed energy beams or microwaves—all perfectly legal under the ABM treaty.

The Reagan Administration is pushing for a more ambitious research program aimed at learning whether the construction of an anti-nuclear shield is feasible. The research phase will take at least five or six years, and actual deployment could not occur, at best, before the end of the century. So Reagan will be long gone when the fateful decisions are made.

There is ample reason for Americans to doubt the wisdom of the accelerated research program itself—the chief one being that, at a time when true national security demands that the huge budget deficit be controlled, we can't afford a costly program of nebulous practicality. But why are the Soviets purporting to make a halt to "Star Wars" their key negotiating goal?

It is true that the Soviets have a deep respect for U.S. superiority in some of the relevant technologies, especially computers. However, even if Reagan caved in tomorrow and said yes, the Soviets would not be willing to halt their own "Star Wars" research program any more than we would. Each power must continue to guard against a technological breakthrough by the other.

Conceivably the Soviets think that Washington can be maneuvered into accepting an ABM research ban that could not be verified, enabling them to continue their program in secret while we halted ours. But they are not really that naive.

A more likely explanation was offered by a one-time participant in arms-control negotiations who theorized that the Soviet strategy is to set up a seemingly straightforward demand—"stop 'Star Wars'"—that they know to be impractical, but that is appealing both to nervous Europeans and to impatient members of Congress.

By this ploy they can stir additional friction within the Western alliance and undercut U.S. public and congressional support not only for "Star Wars" but also for strategic forces in general.

As the former official put it, "Those guys know from experience that, because of the way our political system works, the American government finds it very difficult to negotiate and arm at the same time. They have no such problem."

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't give our best shot at making the coming negotiations the first step toward reducing nuclear arms on both sides. Nor does it mean that "Star Wars" shouldn't be on the bargaining table at all. It should.

The observable facts *do* suggest, however, that the American people should take all those anti-"Star Wars" cries from Moscow at considerably less than face value. The Russians are playing a larger game.

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